

**CITY OF ITHACA**

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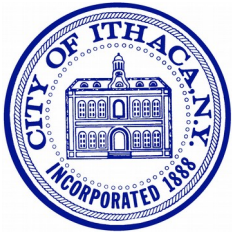
**DEPARTMENT OF PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT**

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TO: Jason Molino, Tompkins County Administrator, and Members of the Tompkins County Legislature

FROM: Bryan McCracken, Historic Preservation Planner

DATE: April 11, 2019

RE: Proposed Purchase of 408, 412-414 N. Tioga St.

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The purpose of this correspondence is to express concerns about the County's purchase of 408, 412-414 N. Tioga St. and the impact the ensuing development project will likely have on several designated historic resources within the DeWitt Park Historic District, listed in the State and National Registers of Historic Places and locally designated in 1971. The comments in this memo are based on the presentation titled "408,412-414 N. Tioga St.: Feasibility Study," made by HOLT Architects to the Tompkins County Legislature on April 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2019.

The proposed buildings footprint, size and scale are at odds with the City's recently adopted comprehensive plan, *Plan Ithaca*, and the guidance provided in *The City of Ithaca Historic District and Landmark Design Guidelines*. The large size of the proposed building will be completely out of character with surrounding properties and will interrupt the characteristic residential rhythm of the street. *Plan Ithaca* emphasizes the importance of maintaining existing neighborhood character and includes the following goal related to new construction in or adjacent to designated historic resources: "new construction within or adjacent to historic districts or individually listed landmarks will be compatible with the existing built environment." The *Design Guidelines* provide guidance on designing new structures and/or additions that meet the objective of this goal. The section of the *Design Guidelines* related to new construction and additions in historic districts is attached for your reference. While it is understood that the schematic drawings presented on April 2<sup>nd</sup> are merely conceptual, it is concerning that the site plan and projected size and scale of the new office building deviate so significantly from the elements of compatibility outlined in the *Design Guidelines*. The footprint of the new building consumes nearly the entirety of the lot, which is the antithesis of most of the properties in the 400 block of North Tioga Street. It also leaves little flexibility in terms of building placement. Dictated by the County's space needs, the size of the building is also of concern. Most of the properties in this block are used for commercial purposes; however, the block retains a residential character through the scale of the structures and visual predictability of the solid to

void ratio of buildings along both block faces. Even the existing 412-414 North Tioga Street respects the residential neighborhood scale of this block. The proposed new building will be substantially larger than the buildings around it and will not expressed the residential quality of the street through its architectural features, including sloped roofs, porches, clapboard siding, and ornamentation.

The County's efforts to preserve the historic residence at 408 North Tioga Street are appreciated and its efforts to restore the resource are supported. However, the residence's incorporation into the new large office building does not align with best preservation practices nor the *Design Guidelines*. Built in the Italianate Style circa 1870, the residence is a highly intact example of this architectural style and contributes significantly to the historic aesthetic quality of the neighborhood. The Italianate Style was based on a romanticized view of the Italian villa and emphasizes the importance of building asymmetry, irregular massing, extruded forms and building placement in a natural landscape. Italianate houses tend to be large, impressive structures that dominate the landscape or streetscape in which they are placed. Again, understanding the conceptual nature of the proposed site plans, the placement of the new building and its interface with the historic residence will negatively impact the property's architectural integrity. Two elevations of historic fabric will be obscured or removed if the historic resource is incorporated into the design as proposed. Also, the height of the three- to four-story office building will significantly reduce the perceived height of the Italianate residence and diminish its historic visual prominence on the street, impacting the visual integrity of its site.

Of additional concern is the sale and potential redevelopment of Building Annex C. While specific details about the sale have not been released, one can assume based on the noted sale price that a potential developer would need to maximize the zoning potential of the site to make a reasonable return on their investment. As noted in the *Design Guidelines*, "zoning may allow an overall height that would not be visually appropriate for a particular parcel within the district." This statement is particularly true for the Building Annex C site, which is zoned for a fifty-foot-tall building but is located adjacent to a highly significant two-story Boardman House. In other words, the height allowed by zoning is significantly taller than that of a sensitively designed and deferential building. The Boardman House cupula is a highly visible landmark within the community and an important character defining feature of the property and the DeWitt Park Historic District. It can be seen from most streets within the area and any permanent obstruction of these views would be considered detrimental to the historic character of neighborhood. A fifty-foot-tall building adjacent to this historic resource would certainly impact these views, making the new structure incompatible with the historic built environment. Moreover, a building of this height would have the same impact on the Boardman House's site integrity as the proposed N. Tioga St. office building on the Italianate residence at 408 North Tioga Street. These factors should be considered when setting the sale price and soliciting developers for the site.

It should also be noted that if a portion of a development site falls within a designated historic district, the entire project is subject to the requirements of the Landmarks Ordinance. In 2003, the Ithaca Landmarks Preservation Commission reviewed and issued a Certificate of Appropriateness for the Hilton Garden Inn project. Although only a small portion of the project site was located within the DeWitt Park Historic District boundaries, the entire project underwent extensive design review to ensure the project did not negatively impact historic resources within the district. As the proposed N. Tioga St. office building is partially located within the DeWitt

Park Historic District, the project is subject to the same review and design requirements as the Hilton Garden Inn project.

Finally, the *Tompkins County Strategic Tourism Plan* identifies heritage tourism as an important tourism type and outlines goals to protect and expand this major travel motivator. Tourists are motivated to visit Ithaca to experience the places and activities that authentically represent the stories and people of the past and present. Established in the 1970s, the DeWitt Park Historic District was the City's first designated resource and is an excellent representative of many important moments in Ithaca and Tompkins County history. From Simeon DeWitt's influence on the layout and character of the community to the establishment of the Ithaca Conservancy of Music in the Boardman House to the residences built by the community's earliest and most prominent citizens to the establishment of the community as the County seat, these events—this heritage—is authentically Ithaca and is worthy of protection as an important piece of heritage tourism infrastructure. The proposed projects in this historic district—the construction of a large, modern office building in the residential area adjacent to it and the replacement of Building Annex C with a larger, modern building—has the potential to negatively impact the authentic historic quality of the neighborhood and degrade this important piece of tourism infrastructure.